Introduction

This is a history of a 900-year-old Sunni shrine in the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Sufi shaykhs who propagated the legacy of the Muslim saint buried thereat.

I first visited Turbat-i Jam in eastern Iran, the seat of the mausoleum of Shaykh al-Islam Ahmad-i Jam, in spring 2010. While traveling from Mashhad to Jam by bus, the fecundity of the province of Jam became evident: distant snowcapped mountains on both sides of Jam's plains fed rivulets, rivers, channels, and subterranean waterways, which nourished agricultural and pastoral activities. Jam was as the fourteenth-century traveler Ibn Battuta had described it: "pretty, with orchards and trees, abundance of springs, and flowing streams." My fellow passengers were dressed suspiciously like their neighbors in Afghanistan. The majority of the region's residents are Sunni, with a burgeoning Shiʿi minority. The passengers were mostly Iranians, with a smattering of Afghan Hazaras and Tajiks. Traditional dress – turbans and shalwar – is not uncommon, although the burqa, ubiquitous across the border in nearby Herat, is rarely seen in the city of Jam or its purlieus. Jam is a prosperous region. It profits from a sensible balance of Iranian tradition and modernity; and Iran's Sunni and Shiʿi cultural heritages.

Turbat-i Jam is a charming burg of around 100,000 souls. It is typically Iranian, with broad, tree-lined boulevards and manicured plazas. The shrine of the premier saint of this section of Khurasan – a storied region with a surfeit of saints – is in the northeast corner of Turbat-i Jam ("the sepulcher of [Shaykh al-Islam Ahmad of] Jam"). Before storing my shoes and venturing past the entrance, I enjoyed the sights of the walled shrine: the ornately decorated portal arch (*iwan*) towered 88 ft/26.8 m, framed by

unblemished blue sky. The Firuzshah Dome (Gunbad-i Firuzshahi) reflected the spring sunlight off its turquoise dome, partly obscuring the awful gash that had characterized it in photographs taken over decades past. The shrine complex is warm and welcoming. The daily traffic of pilgrims ebbs and flows, but is substantial on Fridays and holy days. Under Iranian law, a city can hold Friday (*jumʿa*) prayers at only one location. Ahmad-i Jam's shrine is the locus for *jumʿa* services and Eid celebrations for Sunnis (the Shiʿa of Jam hold *jumʿa* services across town). The shrine's custodian is the prayer leader (*imam-jumʿa*) for the Sunnis of Turbat-i Jam and its environs.

The shrine complex now has two flourishing Islamic seminaries (sing. madrasa) – one for males and one for females – a public library, and landscaped gardens. Ahmad-i Jam's shrine stood in contrast to more famous shrines visited by this writer on travels in the Islamic world; for example, ʿAbdallah Ansari's shrine in Herat (renovated by the Aga Khan Trust for Culture (AKTC); last visited in October 2019), Abu Nasr Parsa's in Balkh (crumbling in 2007; but reconstruction by AKTC was almost complete in October 2015 when I last visited), and Ibn al-ʿArabi's in Damascus (last visited in 2008).[1]

Why has Ahmad-i Jam's shrine flourished while other Sufi shrines throughout the Islamic world have gone to ruin?

How did this unapologetically Sunni community survive for 900 years, and come to thrive in the (Shiʿi) Islamic Republic of Iran? The Shiʿi shrines of Iraq and Iran receive official patronage. The shrine of Imam ʿAli b. Abi Talib (fourth caliph) in Mazar-i Sharif, Balkh, obtains support from Afghanistan's Tajik, Turk, Pashtun, Baluch, Hazara, Sunni, Twelver Shiʿa, and Ismaʿili Shiʿa peoples. Interlocutors at Turbat-i Jam, unwilling to credit the Islamic Republic of Iran for anything positive, claimed the complex had fared better under the *ancien régime* (Pahlawis, 1925–79); but this is contradicted by Qajar- and Pahlawi-era photographs, travelogues, and architectural studies. The shrine complex was crumbling but sparkles today. The aforementioned gash on the Gunbad-i Firuzshahi has since been repaired: the dome is resplendent. The damaged *iwan* was refurbished. The 700-year-old "Old Mosque" (Masjid-i ʿatiq), reduced to fragments of brickwork and stucco, has been masterfully restored to nearly its Ilkhanid-era condition.

[1] AKTC, an Ismaʿili Shiʿa nonprofit, was praised by Afghan officials for restoring Sunni and Shiʿa cultural heritages in Balkh and Herat (fifty-two projects in Herat alone).

The reason the shrine thrives is because Ahmad-i Jam – who fathered forty-two children – is blessed to have thousands of descendants who continue to venerate his memory and to protect his legacy. The contemporary shaykhs of Jam interact with the Islamic Republic of Iran just as their ancestors did with the Seljuqs, Mongols, Timurids, Safavids, Afshars, Qajars, and Pahlawis: they adapt and shift strategy. The community's focus is singular: it is always about Ahmad-i Jam: *this, too, shall pass but Ahmad is forever*. Beatrice Manz observed that "[t]he emphasis on the founder Ahmad-i Jam [. . .] may help to account for the family's receptiveness to a variety of teachings and its continuing adaptability to changes of political power."

This monograph demonstrates the truth of Manz's keen insight. Ahmad-i Jam's successors protect his shrine when they must, and extract benefits from their overlords when they can. This institution's longevity is testament to the resilience and diplomacy of a shifting coalition of shaykhs – primarily males but also females – who have lovingly tendered their saint's grave and managed the complex, generation to generation, from century to century. Decisions are ordinarily based on consensus. A rash act could cost lives and lead to the confiscation of assets and the shuttering of the shrine.

To the credit of the Islamic Republic of Iran,[2] it does not view Islamic institutions such as Ahmad-i Jam's shrine through a sectarian lens, but rather, through the prism of national heritage. The institution may be Sunni, but the complex's eclectic architectural ensemble is testament to Iran's superlative cultural tapestry, and therefore deserving of public funds and technical expertise from the Sazman-i Miras-i Farhangi (Cultural Heritage Organization). The mausoleum of Zayn al-Din (Abu Bakr) Taybadi in nearby Taybad was also reconstructed by Miras-i Farhangi with public and private funds. This, too, is a Sunni institution. The Islamic Republic's outlook toward the preservation of Iranian heritages extends to major faiths: the Zoroastrian fire temple (*atishkada*) in Yazd; the mausoleum for Judaism's Esther and Mordecai in Hamadan; and Catholic and Armenian churches. Persepolis, Pasargadae, Christian monasteries, and other pre-Islamic and Islamic sites among the twenty-four

[2] It is apparently bad form to say anything positive about the Shiʿa state; but it is worth comparing Shiʿa Iran's approach toward its national heritages with the demolition of Islamic and non-Islamic spiritual and sepulchral edifices in Mecca, Medina, Karbala, Qatif, and elsewhere by the Wahhabi Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Moreover, the Shiʿa minority of Saudi Arabia suffer persecutions and indignities. See Toby Matthiesen, *The Other Saudis: Shiism, Dissent and Sectarianism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

recognized and fifty-six tentative UNESCO World Heritage sites in Iran[3] are preserved and protected.[4]

STRUCTURE AND THEMES OF THE BOOK

Part I covers the saint's activities in Seljuq Iran. It reveals for the first time (in Western scholarship) aspects of Ahmad-i Jam's biography that were redacted by Jami hagiographers. His initial training was with the Karrami sect (*madhhab*), but once they were branded "heretics," Ahmad's biography was revised.

The saint cult and the "branding and marketing" of Ahmad's saintly talents are addressed next. Thoughts on sainthood by Hakim al-Tirmidhi (in *Sirat al-awliya'*) offer analytical frameworks. I aim to place the formation of Ahmad-i Jam's saint cult within Islamic tradition. Sometime around 649/1251, about a century after his death, shaykhs of Jam started promoting Ahmad-i Jam as the "protector of the realm," that is, Ahmad-i Jam, "the patron saint of kings." The first king to seek Ahmad-i Jam's protection was Shams al-Din Muhammad Kart, the founder of the Kartid dynasty of Herat (1245–1381), vassals of Iran's Mongol overlords (Ilkhanids, 1254–1335). The branding of Ahmad-i Jam as a saint who protects kings attracted royal support and patronage.

Part II describes how Ahmad-i Jam's successors accumulated wealth for the shrine and propagated his legacy. Marriage between the Karts and Jamis brought financial and architectural bounties to the shrine. A Jami Sufi shaykh and his royal acolyte, the Kart king, Ghiyath al-Din, transformed Ahmad's shrine into a *complex*. The shrine continued to prosper under the Timurids. Tamerlane visited Turbat-i Jam to pay homage at Ahmad's tomb. Temür's son, Shah-Rukh, became a devotee of Ahmad-i Jam, and visited the shrine to associate with his Sufi shaykh, the shrine's custodian, and chief of its Sufi hospices. Mosques, domes, and madrasas were sponsored by Timurid officials, and charitable endowments (waqf) were established. Shah-Rukh and his munificent spouse, Gawhar-Shad, included benefits for Ahmad's shrine in their waqf deed for the Gawhar-Shad Mosque in Mashhad.

[3] See list at https://whc.unesco.org/en/statesparties/ir.

[4] In spring 2019, I again visited the archaeological sites at Persepolis and Pasargadae; and Christian, Jewish, Zoroastrian, and Islamic heritage sites in Yazd, Shiraz, Isfahan, Kashan, Natanz, and Qum. This tour (as with earlier tours) included visits to churches, synagogues, fire temples, mosques, and shrines, where I met with staff and clerics. Observations and statements are documented, and the sites are photographed.

The dawn of the Safavid/Shiʿa age signalled the decline of the shrine's fortunes. Safavid-Uzbek wars were painful for Khurasanians. Prolonged and intense sectarian violence was visited on Khurasan. Jami shaykhs fled to India, where they found succor with their kinsman, the Mughal emperor Humayun, and his son, Akbar the Great. Shiʿi policies toward the shrine were flexible. Shah Ismaʿil I, Safavi renewed fiscal immunities for the shrine's custodian; and Shah ʿAbbas I sponsored major restorative work on the *iwan*. Nonetheless, the shrine declined as conversion to Shiʿism advanced. When Robert Byron (author of *Road to Oxiana*) visited in 1934, the shrine was in decay: "[t]he shrine there was disappointing. So was our lunch."

In Part III, Chapter 5 describes the physical setting of the shrine and its architectural developments. Included are new schematics that were graciously made available by Sazman-i Miras-i Farhangi; photographs of the shrine in decay, from 1977 – the cusp of the Iranian Revolution – courtesy of Warwick Ball; and photographs of its present state. A discussion on the shrine's administration and waqfs follows. A list of known administrators (sing. *raʾis* or *mutawalli*) is included.

In Chapters 6 and 7, the shrine's accumulation of wealth and influence through control of hydrological systems and agricultural estates is analyzed. Acquisition was principally through imperial benefices under the Ilkhanids, Kartids, and Timurids. However, with wealth and influence there existed sociopolitical obligations, namely, service to community: shaykhs had to "feed the people" (*takafful-i umur*).

In Chapter 8, the sacred topography of the shrine, and the diverse spiritual and intellectual activities that blossom within sacred topography, are considered. "Spiritual blessings" (*baraka*) and "divine effusions" (*fayz*) are believed to emanate from the saint's grave. This attracted flows of pilgrims who sought to acquire *baraka* through their venerations, and believers who wanted to be entombed near their saint to secure his blessings until the Day of Judgment. Classes were held inside the shrine: Islamic learning, it was believed, acquired "special merit" if conducted in sacred spaces; hence the erection of seminaries and hospices in sacred spaces. Islamic curricula at the shrine's seminaries (with tables of medieval and contemporary literary works studied), and putative Sufi regimens at the shrine's hospices, are analyzed. A list of known chiefs of the shrine's *khanaqah*s is included.

Part IV describes the mystical doctrines and practices of the Sufis, the core of the saint cult. Ahmad-i Jam did not bequeath a method (*tariq*, *suluk*) for gnosis (*ʿirfan*). The absence of binding rules proved beneficial:

Sufis were allowed freedom to explore. Jami Sufis borrowed doctrines from the Naqshbandiyya, who had become prominent in Timurid Herat. Some Jamis preferred the silent recollection of God (*dhikr-i khafi*) to the vocal method (*dhikr-i jahri*). Gnostic preferences did not degenerate into factionalism as elsewhere. Irrespective of preferred Sufi current, Jamis bonded their hearts (*rabita*) to their shaykh, Ahmad-i Jam, and focused their love on a mental image of Ahmad, the unifying figure around whom revolved sundry Sufi practices.

Critical Sufi practices, *dhikr* (recollection of God), *samaʿ* (auditory stimulation), *khalwa* (seclusion), and *rabita* (bonding the heart) are closely analyzed. The study of the *hybrid* mystical practices of the Sufis of Jam include a case study of a Jami-Naqshbandi shaykh, ʿAziz-Allah Jami, a novitiate of Saʿd al-Din Kashghari, who also initiated ʿAbd al-Rahman Jami, the last great bard of Herat, a man fondly remembered in his native land as the "seal of the poets" (*khatm al-shuʿara'*), which is emblazoned on road signs pointing to his birthplace in the province of Jam.

We turn now to a biography of our protagonist, Ahmad-i Jam.

Part I

The Saint

I

Biography and Hagiography

Ahmad-i Jam's family and education are examined below. Separating biography (putative fact) from hagiography (embellishment or fabrication), however, is challenging. His background includes elements that were whitewashed when political winds shifted, namely, Ahmad's putative training in Karrami *khanaqah*s. His spiritual genealogy (*silsila*) was modified to interpolate a nexus to Imam Riza, the Eighth Imam for the Twelver Shiʿa. Ahmad-i Jam's intellectual journey is captivating, and reflective of the fluidity of Khurasanian Sufism during his long life: Ahmad-i Jam, the son of a Shafiʿi scholar, transitioned to Karrami ascetic (*zahid*) and then to Hanafi mystic (*sufi*).

THE SHAYKH

Ahmad-i Jam was born in 441/1049 in the village of Namaq, which is located south of Nishapur. He died 10 Muharram 536/15 August 1141. The conventional narrative is that Ahmad-i Jam's youth was spent in dissipation. After a "road to Damascus" moment, Ahmad repented (*tawba*) and retired to the mountains of Khurasan, where he remained in seclusion for eighteen years, meditating and praying until God commanded him to rejoin society. He was then about forty years of age. Ahmad settled in the Maʿd-Abad section of the province of Jam and embarked on a life of preaching, miracle-making (*karamat*), and enforcing of the Shariʿa. He built a congregational mosque (*masjid-i jamiʿ*) and a Sufi convent (*khanaqah*) in Maʿd-Abad village. His interpretation of the Shariʿa was uncompromising; he is depicted as a pitiless enforcer of *al-amr bi-l-maʿruf wa-l-nahy ʿan al-munkar*, an Islamic obligation whereby

every Muslim is (theoretically) expected to "enjoin the good and forbid the reprehensible,"[1] or stated differently, the obligation of every Muslim to chastise their neighbors for perceived violations of God's laws. Ahmad-i Jam earned himself a reputation as a frightful busybody who harassed his neighbors and destroyed musical instruments and wine casks in the name of God.[2] He was exceptionally mean to Zoroastrians. Ahmad's circle of devotees burgeoned into a significant Sufi community in Khurasan.[3] Ahmad-i Jam's most famous loyalist was the Seljuq sultan, Ahmad Sanjar (r. 511–52/1118–57) b. Malikshah (d. 485/1092) b. Alp Arslan (d. 465/1072).[4]

Ahmad thrived in Maʿd-Abad village, which adjoined the town of Jam. In the years following Ahmad's death, village and town merged, coming to be called Turbat-i Jam, "the sepulcher of [Shaykh al-Islam Ahmad of] Jam." A Sufi community revolved around a shrine that was initially a simple tumulus. About a century after his death, a funerary building was erected behind the tumulus. Additional edifices were sponsored during the Kartid (r. 643–783/1245–1381) and Timurid (r. 783–911/1381–1506) periods by royal or other high-ranking patrons. The sacred space transformed into a sparkling shrine complex.

[1] Michael Cook, *Commanding Right and Forbidding Wrong in Islamic Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Michael Cook, *Forbidding Wrong in Islam* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003). The second title is a superb introduction to an intricate topic.

[2] A popular activity under the rubric of "*al-amr bi-l-maʿruf wa-l–nahy ʿan al-munkar*."

[3] Fritz Meier, "Ahmad-i Jam," *EI*^{2}, 1:283a; Omid Safi, "Ahmad-i Jam," *EI*^{3} (online); Heshmat Moayyad, "Ahmad-i Jam," *EIr*, 1:648a; Fritz Meier, "Zur Biographie Ahmad-i Gam's und zur Quellenkunde von Gami's Nafahatʾl-uns," *ZDMG* 97 (1943): 47–67; Vladimir Ivanow, "A Biography of Shaykh Ahmad-i-Jam," *JRAS* (1917): 291–365 (Meier and Ivanow are dated but useful); Heshmat Moayyad and Franklin Lewis (trans.), *The Colossal Elephant and His Spiritual Feats: Shaykh Ahmad-e Jam. The Life and Legend of a Popular Sufi Saint of 12th Century Iran* (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda, 2004), 8–12, 21–28; Ibrahim Zanganah, *Sarzamin-i Jam wa rijalan* (Turbat-i Jam: Intisharat-i Shaykh al-Islam Ahmad-i Jam, 1384/2006), 68–69, 71–72; ʿAli Fazl, *Karnama-yi Ahmad-i Jam* (Tehran: Intisharat-i Tus, 1382/2003), 37, 51–53.

[4] On this Central Asian Turkish dynasty, which ruled Iran, see A. C. S. Peacock, *The Great Seljuq Empire* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015). On their religious outlooks, including Sanjar's association with Ahmad-i Jam, see D. G. Tor, "'Sovereign and Pious': The Religious Life of the Great Seljuq Sultans," in *The Seljuqs: Politics, Society, and Culture*, ed. Christian Lange and Songül Mecit (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), 39–62.

AHMAD'S "ORIGINAL" SPIRITUAL CHAIN (*SILSILA*)

Ahmad-i Jam's spiritual pedigree, or initiatic chain (*silsila*), is problematic.[5] Firstly, a Sufi's *silsila* was not emphasized in his epoch, although in later centuries the *silsila* was to become prominent. The eponym of the Naqshbandi Sufi brotherhood (*tariqa*), Baha' al-Din Naqshband (d. 791/1389), famously retorted to an inquiry about his spiritual lineage, that "nobody gets anywhere through a *silsila*."[6] However, in later years, specifically, the Timurid period, emphasis on Sufi *silsila*s became manifest.[7] The earliest *silsila* proffered for Ahmad-i Jam is by his youngest son, Shihab al-Din Isma'il Jami (d. *ca*. 617/1220f.), in his *A Treatise on Proving the Greatness of the Shaykh of Jam*:[8]

> This *silsila* is Ahmad → his preceptor, Abu Tahir Kurd → his preceptor, Abu Sa'id b. Abu al-Khayr → (and so on), Abu al-Fazl Hasan [of Sarakhs] → Abu Nasr Sarraj → Murta'ish [of Baghdad] → Junayd [of Baghdad] → Sari Saqati → Ma'ruf Karkhi → Dawud Ta'i → Habib 'Ajami → Hasan Basri → Hazrat Imam 'Ali b. Abi Talib → the Prophet of Islam.

This spiritual pedigree happens to match the *silsila* extended for Abu Sa'id b. Abu al-Khayr (d. 4 Sha'ban 440/12 January 1049) by his hagiologist, Muhammad ibn Munawwar.[9] We shall return to Abu Sa'id momentarily.

Abu Tahir Kurd is virtually unknown. Over generations, hagiographers excluded filaments of Kurd's spiritual legacy from hagiologies, leaving us with scattered fragments by the time we arrive at the biographical entry for Abu Tahir Kurd in Nur al-Din 'Abd al-Rahman Jami's *Breaths of Intimacy* (*Nafahat al-uns*).[10] There was evidently something in his background that required whitewashing – just as the first forty years of Ahmad's life were diligently sanitized and embellished (as shall be explained). What can be

[5] On hagiologies and interpretive paradigms, see Shahzad Bashir, "Naqshband's Lives: Sufi Hagiography between Manuscripts and Genre," in *Sufism in Central Asia*, ed. Devin DeWeese and Jo-Ann Gross (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 75–97.

[6] 'Abd al-Rahman Jami, *Nafahat al-uns min hazarat al-quds*, ed. Mehdi Tawhidi–Pur (Tehran: Intisharat-i kitabfurushi-i Mahmudi, 1336/1957), 386.

[7] See Devin DeWeese, *An "Uvaysi" Sufi in Timurid Mawarannahr* (Bloomington, IN: Research Institute for Inner Asian Studies, 1993), 6 and n14.

[8] Shihab al-Din Isma'il b. Ahmad-i Jam Namaqi, *Risala dar isbat-i buzurgi-yi Shaykh-i Jam*, ed. Hasan Nasiri Jami (Tehran: Pizhuhishgah-i 'ulum-i insani wa mutala'at-i farhangi, 1391/2012), 24.

[9] Muhammad Ibn Munawwar, *Asrar al-tawhid fi maqamat-i Shaykh Abi Sa'id*, 2 vols., ed. Muhammad Riza Shafi'i Kadkani (Tehran: Agah, 1366–67/1987–88), 1:26, 32, 48–49; Reynold A. Nicholson, *Studies in Islamic Mysticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1921), 10.

[10] Jami, *Nafahat*, 366–68.